

## THE COLOUR OF FORM

Colour applied to buildings often seem to have been picked out randomly. This may be the case both for the colour of the body itself, as well as for the body in its context. Applying colour to architectural form has not been *comme il faut* the recent half century. Natural colours of materials, or only white, seems to have been the most accepted code by architects in late modernism. The fact that many architects are reluctant to use colour may have to do with their education. Perhaps it is the lack of rules for application of colour which has led to the uncoloured, or white and grey walls. But, today a new interest is emerging for the integration of colour and architectural form. (Toy 1996).

This paper has its goal in pointing out the great potential of colour used as a conscious means in creating meaningful architectural form. This is a realm of little research, lacking literature specifying and analysing the problem. Here I will raise some basic questions of colour as an important design aspect.

Colour is a part of nature. Basically, it is a simple system of codification. Grass is green, sky is blue, blood is red. Diversity of colour helps us to separate and to

recognise objects. In this context I choose to see colour representing such a code. Yet, reading the code is very complex, by its interaction with other brain functions, like sensation, perception and cognition. Colour has the capacity to describe or to emphasise 3D form by the way it is applied to the form. Colour alone may also bring out, or exaggerate certain parts of the form. It can also change, obscure, and even destroy perception of form, like in camouflage.

Theory of colour applied to 3D form is almost absent today, but in the 1920-ties architects and artists like Le Corbusier and Fernand Léger among many others, presented reflections on the problem of colour in context of form. Léger was also occupied with separating the two as he stated: We have been working to liberate colour. Before us green was a tree, blue was the sky, etc. After us colour has become an object in itself... (Léger 1970, p.88). His experiments in painting explored these possibilities. (Ill. no. 1, p. 38: Léger's *La partie de campagne* shows the way he separated colour from form)

De Stijl-group in Holland with Mondrian, Rietveld, van Doesburg, and others practised dogmatically its theories on colour and form in architecture, sculpture,

and furniture. But the possibly most consistent theory of the topic in last century rejected other colours than blue, red and yellow. (Friedman 1988).

There are several reasons to explore the relationship between colour and architectural form in our time. Traditional "natural coloured" materials are substituted by mass produced building elements which need to be coloured. The colour industry alone should not decide what colours to use, and in what way they should be used. Architect designers ought to consider colour being a main quality of architecture. The problem of finding a coherence between colour and 3D form is, as we all may suspect, a very complex matter. The pair cannot be separated, operating as a reciprocal dyad. But maybe there is a certain causality between the two? And, could design by colour create more interesting environment? Here I will raise two seemingly simple questions: Is there a certain logic of colour related to form? What kind of additional qualities of form may be perceived by means of colour?

The first question seems to be answered by examples where the colour follows the form. That is when a single object has its own colour, and when adjacent forms each have their own colour. If one coloured form in the latter case also occupies a part of the other form, there may be need for changing the forms themselves.

The logic of form/colour relationship seem to have its root in Identity, Recognition, Order, and Understanding. A coloured form seems to have a specific identity. The object is recognised as a Gestalt obtained by its colour. Claes Oldenburg states: By changing the colour of an object, you change its identity. (Bragg 1991)

Supposing that there exists a basic human need for order and understanding, then differentiation of architectonic elements by means of colour, helps these needs of clarification. This is the reason for extracting details and important constructive parts of a building by deviating colour. The Greek Temple and the Stuttgart Museum by James Stirling display such a pedagogical and logical method of applying colour to form (Ill. no 2, p. 38.)

Opposite to a logical and meaningful use of colour to describe or explain form, colour may destroy form. Urban spaces can be decomposed by contrasting colour on single houses, and when colour opposes the

form, like Hundertwasser's house in Vienna.

The second question presented above about additional qualities of form achieved by means of colour, introduces associations and interpretation of form. The way colour is applied to form may open for these qualities.

"Skin and flesh" metaphor. Careful colour detailing may give a more complex illusion where walls are perceived consisting of a thin layer enveloping the mass. (Ill. no.3, p. 38).

Reduction of volumes. De Stijl-methods are clearly visible in Rietveldt's chair, and in the Schröder-house in Utrecht. Both in exterior and in interior of this house coloured planes are floating in space, deconstructing the mass. The coloured planes do not meet in the corners, but pass each other. Coloured surfaces are obscuring form, creating possibilities of interpretation of volumes. (Ill. no. 4, p. 39).

Addition and subtraction. Following logical colouring of form, parts of the building (or of the 3D form) may be taken out or sunken in, emphasised by colouring that part. The form possesses greater complexity, and may be read on several levels of perception. Sculptural elements may also be emphasised by colour. One reads the form otherwise than if it was monochromatic. Illustrations 5, 6 and 7 (p. 39) are from an exhibition where the author has displayed different principles of applying colour to the same form. From being a simple



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square, the form is perceived in ambiguous ways.

As a conclusion related to the two questions raised, I will state that there seems to be a certain logic between colour and form. Most often colour follow form, and form follow colour. But sometimes one of them is stronger, and the other has to give in, to change form or change distribution of colour. And colour can be applied in such a way that associations and metaphors

emerge, giving additional qualities to the perception of form. Like in all art, the topic of colour and form still seems to be a question of the ambiguous rather than the obvious.

### **References**

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